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AUTHOR Clay, William L.
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ABSTRACT

This speech by a black congressman from Missouri concerns the context in which general questions about black children must be answered. These questions include: (1) How can service providers, institutions, and government entities implement a vision for the future of black children? and (2) How can organizations that serve black children ensure that all black children receive basic support? It is suggested that: (1) the media pay too much attention to the problems black families face and too little to their heroic struggles to deal with these problems; (2) blacks must begin to define and refine the issues in their communities; (3) blacks should reestablish some of the basic values held by their parents and grandparents; (4) it is not hard work and self-reliance alone, but those qualities in combination with direct government assistance, that is required to improve the lot of individuals and it was government action not simply individual effort, that helped build up the white middle class after World War II; and (5) it was racist government policies and racist custom that have handicapped blacks and kept them from their place in the sun. The American society's contradictions and lack of logic concerning political issues are stressed. These contradictory and illogical attitudes color the actions of government, and the actions and beliefs of individuals, both black and white. (BC)

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Speech for the National Black Child Development Institute Conference
St. Louis, Missouri
October 25, 1991

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Congressman William L. Clay
U.S. House of Representatives

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Mr. (Madam) Chairperson, President Glover, Executive Director Moore, Members, Friends and Supporters of the National Black Child Development Institute, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for that warm and gracious reception.

Whenever I am presented in such a flattering manner I always recall the night I was watching television when President Ronald Reagan was being introduced. Well, at any rate, the m.c. presenting President Reagan kept describing him in glowing terms and referring to him as a model this and a model that.

He said Mr. Reagan was a model president, a model husband, a model father. I became a little suspicious about the use of the word model and decided to look it up in the dictionary. Much to my surprise, I found that Webster defines model as "a small imitation of the real thing."

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Like you in the National Black Child Development Institute, I too am not caught up in the euphoria of referring to us as "African Americans." There must be much confusion in the white world about our constantly changing our nomenclature. Several years ago I read a story on the front page of a Miami newspaper that said, "A black police officer arrested a colored man in a negro neighborhood, and charged him with snatching an Afro-American woman's pocketbook."

I would be terribly remiss if I failed to pay tribute to the many outstanding individuals within this organization whose life's work is total commitment to developing our youth to their broadest

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and fullest potential.

In this regard, I speak of those educators, administrators, social workers, psychologists and others who help put young people in touch with the realities of life--- Those who help give purpose and direction to the lives of others.

I can think of no more important issue or concern with which we must grapple than that which has undergirded the efforts of the National Black Child Development Institute for the past twenty-one years, namely, seeking to focus on and to address the most critical problems facing black children. As a key sponsor of the Family and Medical Leave Act, I deeply appreciate the support of this important legislation by your organization. it is further evidence of your concern for black children and your willingness to make your voices heard on key questions of national policy.

As we approach the dawning of the 21st century, it behooves us to recall a quote from Charles Dicken's A Tale of Two Cities, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness..." For many of us in this room, it is the best of times and the age of wisdom. But for many, far too many, who are barely existing on the periphery of this beautiful, majestic hotel, especially those without benefit of education, who are locked in a cycle of frustration and hopelessness, without skills or a support system necessary for negotiating in today's world--it is indeed the worst of times and the age of foolishness.

It is perhaps fortuitous that we should assemble in this place

at this time to engage our intellect and to challenge our resourcefulness in a quest for answers and solutions to many of the issues and problems which beset our communities, and threaten to destabilize our nation.

As we seek to enlarge our understanding and respond to these concerns, several questions come to mind:

How can service providers, programs developers, institutions and governmental entities help make our vision for the future of our children a reality?

How can the Black Child Development Institute and other similar organizations help to ensure that every black child receives the basic support needed to enhance his or her potential for productive adult life?

In addressing these questions, it is important to keep one thing clearly in mind-- There is no such thing as a typical black family. We cannot talk about "the" black family nor "the" typical black child as though such a characterization defines and captures all black people in America.

Although the white media continues to lump us all together, we come in a wide variety of colors and shapes; economic, social and educational circumstance; and as painfully displayed during the recent Clarence Thomas hearings, we hold differing philosophies and views.

Dr. Andre Billingsley, a distinguished educator said (and I quote):

"... Why has so much attention been given in the literature

and most media to the problems black families face, and so little attention to the heroic nature of their grappling with these problems... A major reason for this discrepancy is that black people and black scholars have had no major hand in drawing these portraits... If we raise the corollary question---Why so little attention has been paid to the vast majority of black families while such heavy concentration has been placed on the minority of so-called "female headed families," we come again to a need to understand the strange preoccupations of white social scientists." (End quote)

It is the media that defines for us, <u>who, what,</u> and <u>where</u> we are. In past years, it has been on unwed mothers, pregnant teens, female headed households, urban violence, and drug infested ghettos. This year the focus has been on describing the black male as an "endangered species."

I don't understand why so many black leaders keep repeating the false assertion that there are more black males in the criminal justice system than in college. It may sound good if the purpose is to shock, but it simply is not the truth. This conclusion is based on the most unprofessional kind of research possible. Three years ago, the big lie was that there were more black males in prison than in college. When we pointed to the record-- that there were 488,000 black males enrolled in colleges and only 260,000 in prison, they quickly changed the allegation. Now they contend that there are more black males in the criminal justice system that in college. How would they know? They speak of jail, parole and

probation in one voice without concern for duplicate accounting. There are no records kept by race or otherwise to substantiate this assertion. The same individual could possible be counted three and four times under their scenario. He could have been on bench probation, committed another crime and went to jail, then got paroled and returned to jail for another violation. According to their new math ---one black male in many instances is counted four times.

We must begin to define and refine the issues in our communities, to determine the dialogue and fashion the solutions which will clarify and respond to the problems we face.

Let us refrain from joining the chorus of those who would continue to denigrate and disparage people of color. We must stop demeaning ourselves and debasing our achievements.

Working in concert with one another, we can effect those solutions and in the long-run contribute to prospects for a better life for all of our people!

It is also important for us to review some of the oppressive and regressive attitudes that many hold about our children and the black family.

It is true that our families are undergoing drastic and in some instances, radical changes. But it is also true that these changes are not a recent phenomenon. They have been taking place for several generations and most of these changes are no different than those facing other families of other races who suffer the indignities of extreme poverty and unconscionable neglect. Sub-

standard housing, inadequate medical care and inferior education cannot be remedied through penny-ante self help programs. We must discard the fears and frustrations which only serve to limit our upward mobility. We must launch a collective search within ourselves and our communities to determine what is missing in our system of values. We must go back to the basics such as respect for others and for their property; concern for family and for neighbors; honesty in our dealings with our brother and sisters.

What we need more than anything else is the re-establishment of some basic values that our mothers and fathers and grandparents believed in and lived by. We need to go back 80 or 90 years and determine what made it possible for them to survive, to progress, to grow. Most didn't attend college..couldn't read or write...but those calluses in the palms of their hands and that rheumatism in their knees and arthritis in their shoulders came from mopping floors and digging ditches which made it possible for their black children, your mothers and fathers to matriculate at Spellman, Morehouse and Howard. Made it possible for some to go on to Harvard, Princeton and unfortunately, Yale. They had a mission and a purpose---Their bodies may have been enslaved, but their minds were liberated. And we sit today, three generations later, with liberated bodies and enslaved minds.

In 1920, they were only 10 million---They were illiterate, intimidated, extorted, lynched, discriminated against. But they owned 25 million acres of land. Today, we black people are 30 million strong, educated at the finest institutions of higher

learning--We are speed readers, open heart surgeons, astronauts, architects, lawyers, bankers, economists, FBI agents--Yet with all of this highfalutin ed-u-ma-cated population---our people own less than 5 million acres of land.

And equally important as a value system, we must destroy those debilitating myths and misconceptions about why a disproportionate number of black people are doing so poorly and suffering so badly in a society where most others are not. We must expose the hypocrisy of the new conservative ideologues who offer those simplistic one-line solutions for major problems which require thorough analysis, aggressive leadership and adequate funding. To dispel the idiocy of those verbal medicine men with their devious and deceptive notions, we must counter with indisputable facts.

Historian Leronne Bennett of Ebony Magazine said it so well:

"The problem is not the poor; the problem is the powerful. The problem is not the distribution of contraceptives; the problem is the distribution of income. The problem is not the ghetto; the problem is the white system which created the ghetto and which perpetuates it."

It's nonsense for black people to echo the idiotic notion of "getting government off our backs." Only lunatics would allege that we live in "a color-blind society"---Only the insane believe people can pull themselves out of poverty by hard work and self-reliance---Only a pimp or a paramour would argue that "affirmative action" stifles individual initiative and demeans personal worth. Eve if we refuse to engage these fools in debate, it is necessary

to deal logically and forcefully with their foolishness. Hard work and self-reliance alone have never enabled a race of people to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. It has been a combination of hard work and direct government assistance that has improved the lot of the average American citizen.

After World War II, our government decided that millions of acres of land surrounding the cities were desirable for development. It was not enterprising, hard working, self-reliant white entrepreneurs who made this decision. It was the affirmative action of government policy makers who determined that we would use all the resources available, including tax monies to build roads, schools and libraries on this vacant land and to make it attractive and conducive for living. The government established an affirmative action program guaranteeing loans to white developers to build shopping centers and middle-income housing with front lawns and back yard swimming pools. Hard working, self-reliant white enterprising businessmen had very little to do with it. It was the affirmative action of government policy that created the federal home loan assistance program which subsidized the purchase of houses for middle income white Americans and guaranteed that bankers who financed those homes would not lose on their investment. The Congress passed affirmative action laws allowing purchasers to deduct interest payment on home mortgages from income tax liability. So hard working, self-reliant white Americans have not done all of those wonderful things on their own---They have not achieved such great heights by themselves--The affirmative action

of government played the key role in their Horatio Alger success stories.

The big problem is that black people were left out. We were excluded from this great expansion of opportunity, this great program designed to lift one hundred million poverty stricken white Americans from the Hoovervilles and shanty towns of America and to place them in the middle class.

For the benefit of those who may be in doubt, simply put, we were denied an opportunity to share in this great American experiment. We were handicapped, victimized not by accident, not by oversight, but by deliberate, conscious, affirmative acts of government. Let's not be cute or polite in explaining the phenomena. No, it was not racial segregation or separation of the races that denied our access. These were merely tactics designed to make plausible and acceptable the most inhumane kind of treatment one group of people can inflict on another. It was racist policy and racist custom and racist laws enacted and employed by racist individuals and sanctioned by a racist government that denied us our place in the sun.

Now it is time for us to demand that government become a partner in the resolution of our plight. We don't have to be ashamed to petition our government for financial and economic assistance in order to right past government wrongs. We don't have to apologize for expecting our government to correct long standing inequities and abolish unequal treatment based on race. White America did not get where it is without substantial financial and

economic government help. And we are not going to eliminate the vast disparity between us and others by resorting to nickel and dime self-help programs. We need the same kind of massive government dollar infusion that elevated the majority of whites to middle class status.

I believe that the most justifiable reason for any government to exist---is to do for individuals what they cannot do for themselves. I envision government as the initiator of policies that guarantee every family the right to live in a decent home, in a decent neighborhood---that offers programs to educate every child to the fullest extent of his or her potential -- that creates through economic policies, a job paying a living wage for every person who wants to work.

That's not too much to ask of a country that's spending 300 billion dollars to bail out the crooks who bankrupted our savings and loan industry. I'm puzzled and bewildered by the illogic, the inconsistency, the contradictions that abound in our society. Parents who can't get their own children to pray in church, come to my office lobbying for legislation to force your children to pray in school. Constituents expect me to support billions of dollars for B-2 bombers but oppose thousands of dollars to provide B-1 vitamins for undernourished children. I'm confused when President George Bush, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces who ordered the invasion of Panama and Iraq, can ask Nelson Mandela to renounce violence in his struggle to free twenty-six million black South Africans. Something is terribly wrong when Americans become

emotionally and fanatically obsessed because some idiot burned the flag and then wrapped himself in the constitution. But those same sunshine patriots, declared Colonel Oliver North a national hero when he shredded the constitution and then wrapped himself in the flag. I'm baffled by the contradictions.

It is hard for me to understand how black people here in America who don't register and vote themselves can sponsor rallies demanding the right of blacks in South Africa to vote. I'm overwhelmed by the contradictions and appalled by the hypocracy.

Let me attempt to summarize what government indifference and insensitivity means to the tens of thousands of children in tattered clothes, to the millions of senior citizens in run down, rat infested tenements, to the hopeless minorities in devastated ghettoes. America, the home of the brave and the land of the free, provides for them a sanctuary where the waters run foul and the air hangs heavy; where the leaders are not brave and the poor are not free. Day after day they are treated to the profound nonsense of Sally Jessy Raphael, Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey. night after gruesome night, they are mesmerized by NBC, ABC, and CBS documenting bloody crime and senseless violence--then without pause they are showered with programs romanticizing the luxuries and pleasures of the rich and famous. These programs may be entertainment to some, but they cannot amuse away the pain and the suffering of tens of thousands who depend on food stamps for survival; the millions who suffer the debilitating indignities of unemployment; the unknown number afflicted by alcoholism and drug

addiction. Their humiliation I understand. The silence of decent, born again Christians, I do not. it's an indictment of our civilization that national debate centers around such trivia as capital punishment, abortion and school busing, while our poor, our denied, our rejected sink deeper into a morass of hopelessness and despair.

We come today acknowledging that we do not have all of the answers, but we nonetheless remain resolute in our determination to leave no stone unturned as we work together to find answers.